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beyond affordance and determination**

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Destituting the Interface: Beyond Affordance and Determination

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Abstract

This article proposes the *affordance of the medium* and the *determination of the dispositif* as two distinct approaches to media or technology in general. Taking the dialectical tension between affordance and determination, between medium and dispositif, as its point of departure, the article explores Transmute Collective's *Intimate Transactions* (2005) as a problematic fusion of the two approaches. A historicising re-reading of Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* with regard to current forms of digital control and modes of production then argues that contemporary alienation takes place within the digital interface as the *zone of indistinction* between affordance and determination, and that instead of designing liberating machines or inventing subjective evasions of the dispositif, emancipatory engagement requires a *destitution* of the interface.

Keywords

interface, dispositif, affordance, destitution

In his book *The Interface Effect* (2012), Alexander Galloway proposed two alternative readings of the Greek word *technē: media* as hypomnesic inscriptions on a substrate and *modes of mediation* as the ethos of lived practice (16-18). The first (exemplified by McLuhan, Kittler, and Manovich) is coherent with a reading of affordance as the inherent functionality of objects springing from their material constitution or design. The second is explicitly a reference to the analysis of the dispositif as developed in Deleuze's reading of Foucault.

Taking this distinction a bit further, we can say that where *the medium affords* a certain number of possibilities or use cases because of its physical design, *the dispositif determines* and limits a set of possible actions. The affordances of the medium afford even the limits of use, even the finitude of possibility is somehow a gift of the medium. The dispositif, on the other hand, is an operation of power, and as Foucault stated, power is an action upon an action, a limitation of possible behaviour, and, thus, even the opening of possibility is a restriction of potential by predetermination.

The present article questions the critical or emancipatory potential of these two fundamental approaches to media. Thinker of the dispositif par excellence, Foucault had little faith in the emancipatory aspirations of what I am here describing as a theory of affordance, the aim of which is to design an apparatus or medium that, when used correctly, would necessarily lead to a better world: “Men have dreamed of liberating machines. But there are no machines of freedom, by definition” (Foucault, 2002: 356). Galloway’s faith in the critical potential of the Deleuzian refashioning of Foucault’s theory of the dispositif, on the other hand, hinges on the invention of new subjective forms to escape the determination of dispositival control.

In his famous essay on dispositival determination in the age of cybernetics, “Postscript on the Societies of Control”, Deleuze stated: “There is no need to fear or hope, but only to look for new weapons” (Deleuze, 1992: 4), and Galloway clearly chooses the inventive exploit of the determinations of computational protocols as the best weapon at his disposal:

The goal, then, is not to destroy technology in some neo-Luddite delusion, but to push it into a state of hypertrophy, further than it is meant to go. Then, in its injured, sore, and unguarded condition, technology may be sculpted anew into something better, something in closer agreement with the real wants and desires of its users (Galloway, 2005: 30).

Marx criticised a lacking distinction between “machinery itself” and “the capitalist application of machinery” which led to the “stupidity of contending” against the first instead of the second (Marx, 1976: 569). If we take Marx at his word, what is needed, then, is an analysis that – in addition to the history of technology itself (affordance of the medium) and the history of its utility within power formations (determination of

the dispositif) – takes the history of capital into account. Only via such a perspective can technology and its power be properly periodised and thus critically understood. The means of production are no longer limited to the factory but now include everything from smartphones to urban infrastructures, and algorithmic alienation now takes place beyond human perception and cognition. Any critique must take into account this development within the three-fold structure of the history of technology, the history of power formations and the history of capital.

Taking the dialectical tension between affordance and determination, between medium and dispositif, as its point of departure, the following explores Transmute Collective's *Intimate Transactions* (2005) as a problematic fusion of the two approaches. A historicising re-reading of Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* with regard to current forms of digital control and modes of production then argues that contemporary alienation takes place within the digital interface as the *zone of indistinction* between affordance and determination, and that instead of designing liberating machines or inventing subjective evasions of the dispositif, emancipatory engagement requires a *destitution* of the interface.

Affordance of the medium – A reciprocal relation

The media theoretical approach to the material world as a set of affordances is derived from the term invented by James Gibson, not to describe media but a specific complementarity between animal and environment:

The *affordances* of the environment are what it *offers* the animal, what it *provides* or *furnishes*, either for good or ill. The verb to *afford* is found in the dictionary, but the noun *affordance* is not. I have made it up. I mean by it something that refers to both the environment and the animal in a way that no existing term does. It implies the complementarity of the animal and the environment (Gibson, 2015: 119).

The analytical reach of the concept is meant to go beyond the mere phenomenal environment of a given species and instead designate an interrelation of subjective and objective, psychical and physical, environment and behaviour. Nonetheless, the focal point of the analysis of these interrelations remains the physical constitution of the object at hand: “The object offers what it does because it is what it is” (130). It does

not offer an essence, however, but a number of possible relations afforded those inherently able to (mis-)perceive the “exteroceptible information” of the world in relation to a “coperceptible self” (133). The physical constitution of the object signals possible outcomes of interaction with a perceiving agent able to conceive of what is to be gained or lost from what is afforded. This complementary relation between objective information and perceiving self with regard to the affordances of the environment is what Gibson describes as an “ecological” approach.

It is no surprise that such a theory of the perception of conceivable use has been of importance for certain approaches to design, Donald Norman being the name usually mentioned. Gibson acknowledged that the “information pickup” of the perceiver, i.e. the perceiver’s ability to assess affordances, was open to error, to misperception. Affordances spring from objective complementarity and are thus not dependent on actual perception – the fall of a tree in the forest affords both pain and accessible lumber regardless of whether anyone is there to take the hit or gather the bounty. According to Norman, the task of design, then, is to render visible the clues to the operations of things: “Perceived affordances help people figure out what actions are possible without the need for labels or instructions. I call the signalling component of affordances *signifiers*” (Norman, 2013: 13). Good design provides enough visual cues for the information pickup of affordances to run smoothly without explanation beyond these *signifiers*.

It is from this perspective on the affordances of design that we can go beyond Gibson and consult the first of Galloway’s two approaches to the Greek *technē*: the medium as “substrate and only substrate,” as “hypomnesis,” as “the externalisation of man into objects” (Galloway, 2012: 16).¹ The material world can be transformed by humans so as to afford other affordances, and the medium is just such a changed surface full of signifiers that change the affordances of the environment.

In Galloway’s three personifications of an approach to *technē* as *medium* – McLuhan, Kittler, and Manovich – we clearly see the transformation of the material world in order to ameliorate its affordances and its signifiers. McLuhan presented media not as “externalisations” but as “extensions of man” that “massage” society: “Societies have always been shaped more by the nature of the media by which men communicate than by the content of the communication. [...] It is impossible to understand social and

cultural changes without a knowledge of the workings of media” (McLuhan and Fiore, 1962: 8). The message was the affordances of the medium, not the content transmitted nor the actual human use of either content or medium. For Kittler, different media afford different Lacanian modes: by virtue of their discrete encoding of the world, block letters convey the *symbolic* register; as cinema fuses discrete images into one flowing movement that affords the recognition of the self in motion it creates the Lacanian *imaginary*; and the phonograph’s registration of sound prior to and beyond all meaning affords a rare mediated glimpse at the Lacanian *real* as that which never ceases not to write itself (Kittler, 1999: 15-16). In *The Language of New Media*, Manovich asked the questions “How does the shift to computer-based media redefine the nature of static and moving images? What is the effect of computerization on the visual languages used by our culture? What new aesthetic possibilities become available to us?” (Manovich, 2001: 9). Manovich is basically asking: what are the affordances of new media and what are their signifiers?

To my knowledge, neither McLuhan, Kittler nor Manovich reference Gibson. Evoking them in the description of an affordance approach to media is thus not to shed new light on Gibson but to characterise the function of his terminological contribution, so frequently used in contemporary media theory, as a specific focus – from Gibson’s ecology of perception to Kittler’s media archaeology – on the formal characteristics of media and what they may afford the perceiver or agent. I find the inclusion of affordance a useful modification of Galloway’s critique of the media approach because of the resulting possible tension with the determination of the *dispositif*. Where Galloway distinguished medium from mode, object from action, I propose the distinction between a medium that affords and a *dispositif* that determines in order to evaluate their respective capacities for emancipatory engagement with the status quo.

What is mostly absent from Gibson’s concept of affordance and Galloway’s thinkers of the medium are relations of power, subjugation or exploitation:

What the male affords the female is reciprocal to what the female affords the male; what the infant affords the mother is reciprocal to what the mother affords the infant; what the prey affords the predator goes along with what the predator affords the prey (Gibson, 2015: 127).

From a political point of view, such a reciprocity requires an exceedingly formalist and potentially deeply disturbing abstraction of the relations involved. In the cases mentioned, affordance involves a relation between a giver and a receiver, the prey giving itself to the receiving predator. According to Gibson, “Behaviour affords behaviour” (127) and even violent domination constitutes a reciprocal relation. Although it in no way follows that Gibson considers this reciprocity necessarily equitable, symmetrical, or just, the affordance analysis does not afford a view of the *structural* dissymmetries that spring from material conditions and collective formations:

Why has man changed the shapes and substances of his environment? To change what it affords him. He has made more available what benefits him and less pressing what injures him. In making life easier for himself, of course, he has made life harder for most of the other animals (122).

Man changes the material substrate for his own benefit and the detriment of other species just as those in power change systems of government to favour their position. But what of structural changes to the human environment that fall along divides of class, gender and race – the enclosure of the commons, questions of suffrage, reproductive rights, equal pay, racialised credit forms, and biased algorithms determining who should be hired or fired, and who is eligible for parole? What happens when binary reciprocity proves insufficient to adequately capture the structural power operations of the given medium?

In view of the obvious political limitations of any approach based on reciprocity, Matthew Fuller correctly problematises Gibson’s reliance on what is basically a homeostatic worldview which, although suggestive as “a materialist formulation of the micropolitics of detail that also escapes the form-content dichotomy” (Fuller, 2005: 46), should be enhanced by further engagement with what Foucault, in his description of the prison as a microphysics of power (i.e., as *dispositif*), called “the attentive malevolence that turns everything to account” (Foucault, 1995: 139 quoted in Fuller, 2005: 47). Although the analysis of affordances provides useful insight into the reciprocal basis of possible binary relations of perception and action, it seems exceedingly difficult to wring from it a critical analysis of the role of media in more complex power structures.

Determination of the dispositif – Lines of fracture

When it comes to the structural dissymmetries of what is afforded to whom, or rather, whose actions are determined by what, the dispositif provides a useful analytical tool. Although the term “dispositif” has a less clear origin than “affordance,”² Foucault’s usage in the mid- to late seventies is no doubt fundamental³:

1. “a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms [...]”
2. “the nature of the connection that can exist between these heterogeneous elements”
3. a “formation which has as its major function at a given historical moment that of responding to an *urgent need*. The apparatus thus has a dominant strategic function” (Foucault, 1980: 194-195).

From the point of view of the dispositif, the material world is itself a product of power dynamics beyond the reciprocal relations of perceiver/perceived, giver/receiver, agent/acted upon. Where the affordance approach dissolves the subject/object relation by way of the reciprocal constitution of afforded relations, the dispositif posits a structural power that precludes any reciprocity. In this perspective, the object cannot offer what it does because it is what it is because, according to the dispositif, what is on offer is determined by the strategic function of the ordering of the heterogeneous elements at hand. What the object is, what it offers, and to whom, are all determined by structural operations beyond the heterogeneous elements of the ensemble.

Where, according to Gibson, behaviour affords behaviour in the afforded relation between object and agent, giver and receiver, Foucault insists that “To govern, in this sense, is to structure the possible field of action of others [...]” and that “the exercise of power [is] a mode of action upon the actions of others [...]” (Foucault, 1982a: 790). While Gibson focused on how actions open specific possibilities of further action, Foucault analysed action as either that which limits or is limited by other actions or that which seeks emancipation by refusing the determinations of power through the invention of other forms of action.

Just as Gibson inventively transformed a verb into a noun, Foucault defined the infinitive verb “to govern” in the form of a noun he used on many occasions – governmentality: “This contact between the technologies of domination of others and those of the self I call governmentality” (Foucault, 1982b: 19). And these two aspects of governmentality, which we can call the technologies of domination and the techniques of self,⁴ correspond to the two meanings of the word “subject” in Foucault’s thought: “There are two meanings of the word “subject:” subject to someone else by control and dependence; and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge” (Foucault, 1982a: 781).

In Foucault, we thus find a relation between the operations of power and the possible field of actions of the subject, “governmentality” being the point of contact between subject and power and the “subject” being both the subjected individual and the agent whose fundamental freedom allows the possibility of action beyond the determinations of power.⁵ It is this double relation – subject/power, agency/subjection – that is the focal point of the operations of the *dispositif*.

In the lecture “What is a *dispositif*?”, which served as a main reference for Galloway’s second reading of the word *techné*, Deleuze formulated this focal point of the Foucauldian *dispositif* as the complex relation between lines of visibility, enunciation, force, and subjectification (Deleuze, 1992b) that should be disentangled by cartographical analysis. Visibility and enunciation encompass the question of knowledge – what can be recognised and what can be expressed with any hope of comprehension – while the lines of force, of course, designate power relations. The lines of subjectification are related to the so-called “lines of fracture” where “the productions of subjectivity escape from the powers and the forms of knowledge [*savoirs*] of one social apparatus [*dispositif*] in order to be reinserted in another, in forms which are yet to come into being” (Deleuze, 1992b: 162).

While the three first lines – visibility, enunciation, force – execute the technologies of domination or determination to which the subject is subjected, the techniques of self and thus the self-knowledge of the subject open the possibility of forms of life that escape the determinations of the *dispositif* to such an extent that it may force the “movement of one apparatus to another”:

This bypassing of the line of forces is what happens when it turns on itself, meanders, grows obscure and goes underground or rather when the force, instead of entering into a linear relationship with another force, turns back on itself, works on itself or affects itself. This dimension of the Self is by no means a pre-existing determination which one finds ready-made (Deleuze, 1992b: 161).

This escape from “pre-existing determination” of a subject which, “tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge”, “goes underground” is, of course, what Galloway was referencing when he proposed that the emancipation from the determinations of protocol, a term with which Galloway designates the dominant dispositif form of our contemporary digital condition, requires not technological destruction but pushing it “into a state of hypertrophy, further than it is meant to go.” Actions beyond the determination of the dispositif would force a restructuring of its power operations in the attempt to re-establish a stable order, one that may prove better for the subjects dominated by it.

We can, here, contrast the lines of subjectification that turn back on themselves in the Deleuzian dispositif with the linear reciprocity of the affordances of the medium. The reciprocity of affordances can be described as the rectilinear relationship between giver and receiver, agent and environment, power and subject. The agent either correctly assesses the affordances at hand or not, the afforded relation is there whether it is realised or not. While the reciprocity of affordance exists simply because of a specific possible compatibility of agent and object, the approach of the dispositif, on the other hand, insists on the operational dissymmetries between participants. The operations of power determine the subject by acting on its actions, but the subject always retains a certain amount of freedom with regard to this determination, lest power turn to violence. The approach of the dispositif, then, insists on locating the fracture, the point where the reciprocity of domination and subjugation stops or even slightly diverges from a rectilinear relation and the subjugated subject becomes something else. Becoming something else is crucial for the Foucauldian theory of resistance: “Maybe the target nowadays is not to discover what we are but to refuse what we are” (Foucault, 1982a: 785).

***Intimate Transactions* – Design for engagement**

It is thus possible to sketch two different approaches to the Greek word *techné*: one considering the affordances of the medium, the other focusing on the determinations of the dispositif – one having to do with the design of possibility, the other with the possibility of creating a new form of life, what Foucault called *ethos*, which surpasses the determinations of power.

Foucault sometimes described the creation of *ethos*, *ethopoiesis*, as “the arts of oneself” or “the aesthetics of existence.” He argued that in antiquity, the search for an ethical practice was a question of giving one’s life a specific form in which one could recognise oneself, be recognised by others and perhaps even serve as an example for posterity (Foucault, 1988). With this aspect of aesthetics, what Deleuze termed “Life as a work of art” (Deleuze, 1995), it is no wonder that the subjective refusal of determination via lines of fracture in the engagement with the dispositif has become something of an inspiration for politically engaged art.

However, the artwork’s good intentions of affording lines of fracture somehow risk constituting a zone of indistinction between the media design of affordances and the ethos of dispositive fracture. One such artwork is Transmute Collective’s *Intimate Transactions* (2005), which clearly expresses the attempt to appropriate design affordances as a means of producing lines of fracture. The work is an installation involving two separate physical locations, each containing a large “screen-space” and a so-called “Bodyshelf” that serve as the media for an interfacial connection between the twin sites. The screens open unto a shared virtual world with which the installation’s two participants can interact via sensors in the shelf. Participants use full-body movements to control the movements of their avatars, to navigate the virtual world, and to interact with its creatures. In turn, the interactions in screen-space are accompanied by haptic and sonic feedback in the Bodyshelf as well as a haptic pendant on the participants’ abdomens.

The virtual world is inhabited by creatures from whom the participants can collect assets for their own avatars but this impoverishment of the virtual environment results in a slower and more wizened world that can only be reinvigorated by the collaboration of the two participants:

They must conjoin their avatars and work in unison to return assets to the creatures. Again this interaction relies upon movements on the Bodyshelf, which navigate the conjoined avatars. And again, the Bodyshelf provides a conduit for feedback. When their avatars are interlocked, the users can feel each other's push and pull through the Bodyshelf. As their motion is relayed back and forth, they become part of a remote, embodied collaboration (Hamilton, 2008: 180).

The installation thus provides an immersive experience where the entire body is engaged in a collaboration for the continued vitality of the virtual world. Pia Ednie-Brown, who was one of the designers of the work's haptic feedback, calls this designed collaboration a "relational design ethics," "striving for a balance between affecting and being affected" (Ednie-Brown, 2007: 329 quoted in Bertelsen, 2012: 33).

The relation between affecting and being affected evokes the Deleuzian reading of Spinoza's concept of affect (*affectus*) as the ability to affect and be affected, i.e., as an increased or diminished ability to live and act (*vis existendi* and *potentia agendi*). Although Deleuze is not preoccupied with equilibrium or a *balance* between affecting and being affected, the ability to affect and be affected plays an important role, for instance in his just quoted reading of the dispositif, where the line of subjectification "turns back on itself, works on itself or affects itself." This affecting of oneself involves a careful dialectics of affecting and being affected. It requires a turning away, a being disaffected by power, as well as the twin abilities of affecting and being affected by oneself.

Drawing on Ednie-Brown and Transmute Collective's artistic director Keith Armstrong's description that although "there are many ways to approach the work, it ultimately rewards participants with a willingness to collaborate" (Armstrong, 2005), Lone Bertelsen's analysis describes the work as the "Rigorous attempt to *design for engagement* within the 'logic of affects' that makes *Intimate Transaction* a matter of 'transitivity,' more than interactivity" (Bertelsen, 2012: 40, my emphasis). Bertelsen is here clearly in agreement with the work's creators in her celebration of their "design for engagement" as a means of going from the interaction of individual subjects to a logic of affective trans-subjectivity. The interface becomes the zone of indistinction between the two individuals who enter into new trans-subjective formations because of the feedback between each participant and the virtual world.

The work seems to take as its primary concern the environmental consequences of individually constituted subjects whose actions are determined by self-interest: “We now live under the enduring mantle of a global crisis, a self-imposed act of unparalleled and seemingly irrational self-destruction, which we misname as ecological – WE are the crisis” (Armstrong, 2005). This self-destructive “WE” is not ecological. To the contrary, the crisis is caused by our inability to act ecologically, i.e., in accordance with what is afforded by the world around us. According to Armstrong, ecology – as a way of “striving for a balance between affecting and being affected”, one could say – is the explicit goal of the work: “the way we approach design can have an enormous impact upon the way that we interact with the world. It can potentially change the way that we approach, and therefore understand, ecology” (Armstrong quoted in Bertelsen, 2012: 41).

The design affordances of the work should not only bring us to understand ecology, they should make us engage in an ecological equilibrium. And such equilibrium is, with good reason, claimed to depend on collective participation instead of individual appropriation of the assets of the world at hand. Bertelsen draws on Brian Massumi to speak of a “caring for belonging as such” (Bertelsen, 2012: 42) and, referencing Erin Manning, she celebrates a “participation” beyond the individual, a participation in a “relational movement” (Bertelsen, 2012: 44). It is quite clear that the artists, as well as Bertelsen’s sympathetic reception of their work, claim that the very design of the work affords a new line of fracture – “an ethical and reparative turn toward a restoring of ecological balance” (Bertelsen, 2012: 41) – as a means to avoid the current destructive crisis: “This *deliberately designed possibility* for (networked) transsituational collaboration can deterritorialise the more destructive habits of the individual [...]” (Bertelsen, 2012: 54, my emphasis).

Society of the interface

Boris Groys’ article “On Art Activism” clearly hones in on what I am trying to address here:

Art activists want to be useful, to change the world, to make the world a better place – but at the same time, they do not want to cease to be artists.

And that is the point where theoretical, political and even purely practical problems arise (Groys, 2016: 43).

Intimate Transactions draws on the theoretical tradition of the *dispositif* (Deleuze, Guattari, Massumi) and its focus on *ethos* – what Galloway called “modes of mediation” – as a way of pushing the current technologies of domination out of shape so as to better suit the needs of our contemporary condition. To paraphrase Armstrong, the liberal subject and its dispositively determined inability to engage in trans-subjective collaboration is the basis of the current ecological crisis and its reparation depends on an ethical surpassing of this subjective form. But these reparative aspirations of new *ethos* are produced by design affordances as signalled by what Donald Norman called *signifiers*. The world is supposedly liberated from the self-destructive tendencies of individual appropriation of assets because the design rewards participatory collaboration and punishes both individual appropriation and disengagement. The new and reparatory ethos thus hinges on a belief in the emancipatory affordances of the design of the medium. What should be questioned with regard to *Intimate Transactions* is, then, the political viability of “designing for engagement” as a zone of indistinction between affordance and *dispositif*.

Galloway referenced the ambiguity of the Greek *techné* in order to argue the political necessity of going beyond the affordances of the medium via an analysis of the determinations of the *dispositif* and its possible exploits. Groys does something similar, when he evokes the ambiguity of *techné* as the indistinction between art and technology, between art and design (46), and proposes the radical perspective of art as seeing “the present status quo as already dead, already abolished,” while arguing that the aspirations of design towards “the stabilisation of the status quo will ultimately show itself as ineffective” (60).

In view of this article’s conceptual trajectory, the problem of the stated intention and sympathetic reception of *Intimate Transactions* can be characterised as a result of the worst possible reading of Deleuze’s rendition of the *dispositif*. It should be noted here that while the *dispositif* is always a matter of the predetermination of power and the possibilities of indetermination *in spite of* and *in resistance to* this predetermination, Foucault locates the fracture outside of the *dispositif* (often in the form of asceticism), whereas Deleuze situates it as a line *within* the *dispositif*. The problem is thus precisely

the belief that resistance is determined/given by the *dispositif*, that the *dispositif* can afford or allow for specific modes of (self-transformative) action beyond itself. Deleuze includes the fracture of resistance within the *dispositif* as a way of schematising Foucault's claim that the analysis of power should always take resistance as its point of departure (Foucault, 1982a: 780). He in no way implied that fracture springs from the proper design of the three other lines.

Intimate Transactions thus perfectly incorporates the zone of indistinction between medium and *dispositif*, between designed affordances and the lines of fracture of ethical life as a work of art. Resistance is presented as an affordance of the *dispositif* and thus forecloses any hope of actual fracture. The work, therefore, should not be seen as a "reparative turn toward a restoring of ecological balance" but, rather, as a clear expression of contemporary technologies of domination. Instead of an activation of mind and body in a caring ecological collaboration, the positioning of the engaged body on the Bodyshelf in front of the virtual world of the screen-space should be seen as a contemporary digital counterpart to the mechanical device of punishment in Kafka's penal colony. *Intimate Transactions* clearly holds a certain amount of truth with regard to a diagnosis of the present, but it is the opposite of that intended by its creators. The truth of the work should be found in the perfect allegory of the read/write operations of contemporary technologies of power, where engagement is rewarded and disengagement punished, and where the physical and psychic minutiae of the subject are inscribed in the database as well as onto our very bodily fates.

In order to understand this allegory of our contemporary condition, I propose to examine *Intimate Transactions*' interfacial participation design in the perspective of Guy Debord's concept of *the spectacle*, which served as a periodising characterisation of its day: "The whole life of those societies in which modern conditions of production prevail presents itself as an immense accumulation of *spectacles*. All that once was directly lived has become mere representation" (Debord, 1995: 12). Debord's periodisation is performed simply by paraphrasing the famous opening of the first chapter of *Capital* volume 1: Marx's accumulation of commodities has become an accumulation of spectacles. The perceptible world itself has been replaced by images, not because of mass media but because of the increasing intensity of what Marx described as commodity fetishism which had reigned unchallenged since the fading of

the German and Russian revolutionary momentums in 1923 and the economic boom in manufacturing and consumption that followed World War II.

According to Debord, *the spectacle* is the extension of the domain of the economy to cover all aspects of life: “[...] *the autocratic reign of the market economy* which had acceded to an *irresponsible sovereignty*, and the totality of *new techniques of government* which accompanied this reign” (Debord, 1990: 2, my emphasis). *Autocratic reign of the market* and *new techniques of government* – one springs from the other as the images of the spectacle circulate and operate as governmental techniques. The reign of the market generates its own modes of subjugation where *action* is replaced by passive *contemplation*:

The spectator is simply supposed to know nothing, and deserve nothing.
Those who are always watching to see what happens next will never act:
such must be the spectator’s condition (Debord, 1990: 22).

While this is still, in a certain sense, an excellent description of contemporary binge watching on the abundantly available streaming services, media no longer let their images fall upon passive consumers that dare add nothing. Whereas the description of the passive spectator seems an apt description of the 1980s culture of television, when the critique of the channel-surfing couch potato was predominant, it now appears inadequate.

The passive consumption of broadcast media has clearly been replaced by media that invite the active participation/valuable contribution of the consumer, only for these media to consume the consumer in turn. *The prosumer has been technologically produced only to be technologically consumed.*⁶ While watching the image, the image watches the spectator (Paglen, 2016); while reading an e-book, the “e-book reader” reads the reader of the e-book (Alter, 2012); while gaining information from Google, news services or social media, they all gain a terrible amount of information from you (Stalder and Mayer, 2010). When we read the computer, the computer reads us, and when the computer reads, it writes elsewhere, so when the digital interface reads our participation, our destinies are written to the database where algorithms determine who is hired or fired, who is convicted of a crime and who is let out on parole, and who pays how much for health insurance.

The passivity described by Debord was a matter of the absence of historical political agency, however, and not just the passivity of the media consumer. As stated by the Situationists, the spectator engages in a specific form of frantic participation: “The internal defect of the system is that it cannot totally reify people; it also needs to make them act and participate, without which the production and consumption of reification would come to a stop” (Situationist International, 2006: 106). But this is a participation in the neatly separated spheres of production and consumption. As Debord stated: “alienated consumption is added to alienated production as an inescapable duty of the masses” (Debord, 1995: 29).

The alienated consumer described by the Situationists had its proper place on either side of the show-window or the factory wall. The admirer or consumer of commodities/the commodified subject of conspicuous consumption were subjective modes distinct from the labour process’ commodification of time. The show-window distinguished the desiring consumer from the enviable consumer on display, just as the walls of the factory operated a distinction between consumer and producer, the punching in and punching out, and the clear imperative that the wages earned on one side were transformed into consumption on the other.

Now, contemporary alienation takes place within the digital interface as the zone of indistinction between production and consumption. You produce data by consuming data and the more you produce data the more you are consumed as data. While Debord and the Situationists tried to escape the imperative of participation by breaking free of the commodifying circuits of the art institution and taking to the streets, it is increasingly difficult to find a way out of the zone of indistinction of the interface. This – that there is no way out because resistance has been included in the interfacial dispositif as an affordance of its design – is the truth of *Intimate Transactions*.

Destituting the interface

Instead of a training ground for a new political utopia where our ability to decipher and respond to the signifiers of the visual and haptic interface allows us to transcend ourselves in a reciprocal ecological equilibrium, *Intimate Transactions* should thus be seen as an allegory for the present imperative of interfacial participation, i.e. for *the society of the interface*. Whereas the virtual world in *Intimate Transactions* is impoverished by

participant appropriation of interfacial assets, participants in the contemporary society of the interface are alienated by collaborative engagement as they are continually coded as avatars, profiles, data sets. The affordances of a trans-subjective affective equilibrium should be seen as the current dispositional dividualisation of the subject, which Deleuze described as the transition of collective form from the mass to the databank (Deleuze 1992a). When any and all participation is indexed and priced as data, the affective equilibrium of the interface becomes the ability to affect only insofar as the interface has affected and only in accordance with the feedback loop required to maintain homeostasis within the system. In short, it is the imperative to always participate but never act.

Just as Debord radicalised Marx by replacing the accumulation of commodities with the accumulation of spectacles, we should radicalise the spectacle in the contemporary “subordination of production to the conditions of circulation” (Bernes, 2013: 180), where the show-window and the factory wall have dissolved in the indistinction of the interface. This dissolution of the subject in the dividual of the interface, which we find thematised by *Intimate Transactions*, was already described as an essential part of the spectacle:

The spectacle erases the dividing line between self and world, in that the self, under siege by the presence/absence of the world, is eventually overwhelmed [...]. The individual, though condemned to the passive acceptance of an alien everyday reality, is thus driven into a form of madness in which, by resorting to magical devices, he entertains the illusion that he is reacting to this fate (Debord, 1995: 153).

In *Intimate Transactions*, the interface is designed to erase the dividing line between self and world in the ecological reciprocity of participants and interface. The participatory *ethos* afforded by this design constitutes precisely an illusory reaction to one’s fate by “magical devices” and its critical potential can thus best be described as what Debord called the “spectacular critique of the spectacle”, i.e. the indistinction between “the fake despair of a non dialectical critique on the one hand and the fake optimism of a plain and simple boosting of the system on the other” (Debord, 1995: 138-139). The despair of ecological crisis finds hope in interfacial media affordances that only affirm

the technologies of domination. In short, when faced with the interface, there is no way out.

If taken as intended, the work fails as an analysis of contemporary media and power on two accounts; one is theoretical and the other historical:

First, the work enters into a zone of indistinction between what I have characterised as the affordances of the medium and the determinations of the dispositif. Here, the contribution of the second approach with regard to the first – i.e., its ability to critically analyse dissymmetrical power operations beyond the reciprocal relation of affordances between agent and environment in order to locate lines of fracture or a way out of dispositival predetermination – is suspended, while its emancipatory promise of well-designed affordances remains in force – an empty promise leading nowhere but the interface.

Second, the work disregards the historical developments of capital where the spheres of production and consumption as demarcated by the show-window and the factory wall have collapsed into the zone of indistinction of the interface from which the only way out seems to be utter immiseration.⁷ As production and markets have globalised and profits have moved from production to financialised circulation, ever greater parts of the workforce are excluded from the possibility of being exploited by wage labour. Participation is thus not only an imperative, it is increasingly presented as a privilege.

Not being able to disengage from the interface, to prefer not to, without hurting the operations of the system, which is the lesson of *Intimate Transaction*, constitutes the interfacial dispositif of the preservation of the status quo. Continued participation in the peaceful but strict protocols of the interface is required for the world to thrive. The protocols of the interface constitute “a technique for achieving voluntary regulation within a contingent environment” (Galloway, 2005: 22), where “the behaviour is emergent, not imposed” (24). Within the regime of the interface you are free to do whatever the interface protocols allow; you can even try to circumvent, hack them and thus participate in their further development, as long as you participate, for *as long as you participate nothing happens*.

Armstrong claimed that “WE are the crisis” and hoped for the emancipatory affordances of a design for ethical engagement. Walter Benjamin had a different diagnosis: the fact that it continues this way *is* the catastrophe.⁸ The interfacial circulation of images incites participation without thought or action. When we see the social media images of Donald Trump, it is far too easy to get caught up in the meme, in the satisfactory laughter at the narcissist baby, the haughty moron. In the spectacle of the interface, swift judgment is welcomed so that historical analysis of the conditions of the present is forever postponed. It is far too joyful to engage in what Jodi Dean (2010) called “affective networks” where the rapid movement through the interface affords us enjoyment rather than understanding, participation rather than action.

If the status quo of the interface and its imperative of participation is the catastrophe, then what reparation is available to us? Benjamin’s response was to pull the emergency brake. Instead of a vulgar faith in automatic historical progress, Benjamin indicated that *now* is the time to bring the operations of oppression to an end. This is the hidden reference in Agamben’s reading of *Bartleby*’s “I would prefer not to”:

‘I would prefer not to’ is the *restitutio in integrum* of possibility, which keeps possibility suspended between occurrence and nonoccurrence, between the capacity to be and the capacity not to be (Agamben, 1999: 267).

“Restitutio in integrum” is used by Benjamin on several occasions to indicate not reparation of the system, but restitution of the fallen and the exploited, not a balance or an equilibrium of reciprocal relations, but an end to all relations of domination. Such restitution springs neither from media affordances nor dispositival lines of fracture, but from potentiality beyond the capacity to be and not to be, beyond the capacity to affect and be affected, beyond affordance and determination. It is a rendering inoperative of the operations of *techné* – what, in his later writings, Agamben has called a “destituent potential” (cf. e.g. Agamben, 2016).

Galloway rejected the destruction of technology in favour of the effort to “push it into a state of hypertrophy.” In his own essay on the dispositif, Agamben rejects both its destruction and its correct use in favour of a rendering inoperative of its power (Agamben, 2009). Destitution is neither destruction of what is nor the constitution of

the new, it is the rendering inoperative of both affordance and determination, both medium and dispositif. The truth to be found in *Intimate Transactions* is the catastrophe of the interfacial status quo and the necessity of its destitution. Destitution of the interface – the digital dividuation of the participating subject in the age of a financialised indistinction between production and consumption – is the restitution of possibility of new forms of life, not as afforded lines of fracture within the dispositif, but as the simple possibility to be whatever. Such is the hope that can never be fulfilled by art as other than the acknowledgement that the present status quo is already dead, or, as was eloquently stated on Twitter: “Revolutionary art is not a mirror held up to society but a feral peacock attacking its own reflection in the high-gloss paint of a Ferrari” (Bernes, 2018).

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Notes

- ¹ It should be noted that Gibson himself had a very different concept of the medium, which for him was a purely environmental factor such as air or water that "affords respiration or breathing; it permits locomotion; it can be filled with illumination so as to permit vision [...]" (Gibson, 2012: 14). For Gibson, Galloway's first conception of *techné* would be both a tool, which is quite explicitly "a sort of extension of the hand" (36) and a surface "so treated as to make available an arrested [or progressive] optic array, of limited scope, with information about other things than the surface itself" (279).
- ² Agamben points to the Greek concept of "oikonomia" in early Christian theology as the primordial separation of substance and practice, being and doing, which he considers the fundamental characteristic of the *dispositif*, the Latin translation of "oikonomia" being "dispositio." With a quick reference to Heidegger's "Gestell" or "enframing," Agamben also traces the genealogy of the Foucaultian usage via Jean Hypollite's reading of Hegelian "positivity" (cf. Agamben, 2009).
- ³ Someone quantitatively inclined would be able to demonstrate by normalised frequency that among the three periods of Foucault's thought – the analysis of knowledge, of power and of the subject – the *dispositif* belongs to the second, and that it is replaced by a focus on "ethos" during the last years of his life.
- ⁴ There is a long tradition for problematic English translations of the French "technique" and the German "Technik" as "technology" – a confusion, which has been well described in (L. Marx, 2010; Schatzberg, 2006; Salomon, 1984). The distinction between "technologie" and "technique" in Foucault is not completely consistent either but there is a general tendency in which "technology" designates the operations of power and knowledge. An obvious example is the analysis in *Discipline and Punish* of a "microphysics of power" which he found in the "political technology of the body" as characteristic of the disciplinary society. On the other hand, "technique" has a tendency to designate a praxis, as in the case of Greek *ethopoietis* (cf. Foucault, 1994).
- ⁵ For Foucault, freedom is a prerequisite of power: "Power is exercised only over free subjects, and only insofar as they are free" (Foucault, 1982a: 790). If freedom is excluded by power operating on the body instead of on the possible field of actions, power becomes violence.
- ⁶ The term "prosumer" was described by its originator Alvin Toffler as the "progressive blurring of the line that separates producer from consumer" (Toffler, 1980: 267). While Toffler saw this as affording "[...] a new form of economic and political democracy, self-determined work, labour autonomy, local production, and autonomous self-production [...]," Christian Fuchs rightly states that "[d]ue to the permanent activity of the recipients and their status as prosumers, we can say that in the case of corporate social media the audience commodity is an Internet prosumer commodity" (Fuchs, 2013: 33).
- ⁷ Cf. Marx (1976: 798) and "Capital may not need these workers, but they still need to work. They are thus forced to offer themselves up for the most abject forms of wage slavery in the form of petty production and services – identified with informal and often illegal markets of direct exchange arising alongside failures of capitalist production" (Endnotes, 2010: 30).
- ⁸ "Daß es »so weiter« geht, ist die Katastrophe." The passage appears in both "Zentralpark," 673 and *Das Passagen-Werk 1*, 592.

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